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**NEW PROGRAM HELPS KEEP FAMILIES TOGETHER AND REDUCES STATE
DOLLARS SPENT ON OUT OF HOME CARE**

OLYMPIA – The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges has determined that a Washington State program returned children to their families in over 50% more child welfare cases, compared with cases before the program.

The successful pilot parents representation program now in place in two Washington juvenile courts responds to a growing state and national concern over decreasing rates of family reunifications in dependency and termination cases.

The program was a result of a study performed by the State Office of Public Defense at the direction of the 1999 Legislature. The study found that the parents' resources to respond in these cases were dwarfed by the resources available for the state.

In dependency cases evaluated by NCJFCJ, the state had removed children from their homes and placed them in foster or other out of home care because of alleged abuse or neglect. Generally, in termination cases, the state is seeking to permanently sever the parent-child relationship for all purposes.

The Washington State OPD program provides parents with better attorney services to aid them in navigating through the complex system. These attorneys assisted parents in demonstrating that they could provide a safe home for their children. The program has been operating in Pierce County Juvenile Court and in Benton-Franklin Juvenile Court for two and a half years.

In addition to addressing the tragedy of family disintegration, the success of the program in keeping families together decreases costs to the state by reducing the need for foster care and adoption subsidies.

Today, the Washington State OPD is releasing a unique audio CD of the stories of families who were able to reunify as a result of the parents' representation program. This CD was funded by a grant from the Marguerite Casey Foundation.

Washington State OPD is requesting the Legislature to appropriate \$2 million in the 2003 state budget to continue and modestly expand the program, and hopes to implement it in all state juvenile courts as soon as resources permit.

The program evaluation by the NCJFCJ showed that after the program, families were reunited in 53% more cases than before the program. The NCJFCJ is a national organization of family and juvenile court judges dedicated to serving the nation's children and families by improving the courts of juvenile and family jurisdictions. The mission of the NCJFCJ is to better the justice system through education and applied research and to improve the standards, practices and effectiveness of the juvenile court system.

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